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Learning from others in education through study visits and direct observation has a long history. It has always been comforting to expect to avoid mistakes by taking advantage of others' experience. This expectation is even stronger today in our endeavours to create a European future. Yet these are not always successful. Education institutions are too complicated and closely interwoven with society to allow for an easy and clear understanding of their functioning. This paper looks critically at the character and the prospects of study visit programmes. It identifies the difficulties and the pitfalls of study visits and investigates the circumstances under which such visits can really contribute to successful policy-making and problem resolution.

(¹) The English version of the questionnaire is in Stewart Fraser (1964). The Greek translation can be found in D. Mattheou (2000). See also Kalogiannaki, P. (2002).

(²) Horace Mann, for example, reported to the Board of Education of the State of Massachusetts in 1844 that '... if we are wise enough to learn from the experience of others... we may yet escape the magnitude and formidableness of those calamities under which some other communities are now suffering. On the other hand, I do not hesitate to say that there are many things abroad which we, at home, should do well to imitate'; and Victor Cousin in his report (1833) insisted that 'The true greatness of people ... [consists]... in borrowing everywhere what is good and in perfecting it while appropriating it for oneself ... We can assimilate what there is good in other peoples without fear of ever ceasing to be ourselves'.

Promoting understanding in education across Europe

Study visits and the contribution of comparative education

This paper looks critically at the character and the prospects of study visit programmes. It identifies the difficulties and the pitfalls of study visits and investigates the circumstances under which such visits can really contribute to successful policy-making and problem resolution.

More than one and a half centuries ago, Marc Antoine Jullien de Paris, a French intellectual and educator, a cosmopolitan and friend of outstanding personalities like Napoleon, Jefferson, Pestalozzi and Humboldt, was among the first to appreciate the contribution education could make to the well-being of people and in the progress of European societies. He firmly believed that if backward European nations could only become acquainted with successful educational practices abroad, they would benefit from their example and progress (Jullien, 1817). To that end he devised a detailed questionnaire (¹) aimed at collecting information systematically, and recommended that study visits of education officials to other European countries should be organised. In this sense he was a forerunner of many contemporary EU programmes such as Arion.

Although his project had only limited success, education officials did follow some of his recommendations. They travelled abroad, they visited schools and other institutions, they observed and took notes, they collected data and issued reports to their national authorities. Their aim was to discover, in foreign education systems, the optimum solution to their own education problems. It was the era of nation-building through the

construction of national education systems (Green, 1990), an era which comparative educationalists usually refer to as the period of selective education borrowing (Noah and Eckstein, 1969). It was firmly believed that successful foreign institutions and practices, once carefully observed and studied, could be transplanted and duplicated at home. Nation states could only benefit from such a process (²).

Yet by the end of 19th century it was quite evident that the newly established national systems of education had very different characteristics. Despite extensive educational borrowing, they had failed to converge. They differed in some of their fundamental values, in their structure and organisation, in their administration and so on. Perhaps more significant were the differences in the way peoples in Europe had been guided to perceive each other, a fact that allowed bloody confrontations to take place among them twice in 30 years during the 20th century.

Europe is a peaceful place today. Age-long hatred has given way to cooperation and compromise. The vision of a united Europe is gradually and, on occasion, grudgingly being accomplished. Education, still being de jure the exclusive responsibility of nation states, is now being called upon not only to serve exclusively the national interest, as in the past, but also to develop the European identity by promoting mutual understanding, by benefiting from each other's experience and by removing every obstacle that stands in the way of European integration. To this end - purposefully, sys-



tematically and openly - the EU authorities are trying to help educationalists grasp the essence of other peoples' ways of thinking as developed through education. To meet this clearly political objective, a number of programmes - among which the study visit programmes are reminiscent of the above-mentioned 19th century practices - have been developed. To be efficient in fulfilling this noble cause, the EU study visit programmes, on which this paper exclusively focuses, should make the best of the valuable experience and of the conventional wisdom of comparative education. In what follows, we present the main elements of this valuable experience and suggest the ways in which they may be used in making study visits effective instruments of mutual understanding across Europe.

The conventional wisdom of comparative education

Comparative education is one of those academic disciplines that have had a turbulent life (Bray, 2003; Wilson, 2003; Cowen, 2000; Crossley, 2000; Mattheou, 2000; Holmes, 1965; Hans, 1949). It started as an endeavour to reveal and understand the reasons that lay behind the differences observed among the newly established in the 19th century systems of education, despite the extensive and long-lasting cross-national influences in the field. It then aspired to confirm the causative relationship which allegedly existed between society and education, as part of the discipline's considerable contribution to the noble cause of preserving peace during the years between the two world wars. In the early post-war decades it focused on studying problems related to the democratisation of education and to development of education. Later on, reflecting the preoccupations of the day, it grappled with contemporary issues, from globalisation and the knowledge society to social exclusion and the learning process - all presently featuring in the education agenda. In all of these cases, even when pledging allegiance to the cause of pure theory, explanation and understanding, comparative education never actually renounced its political aspirations. As it dealt for decades with the realities of decision-making in education, it accumulated a rich and precious experience, which is codified in a number of 'articles of faith'. Three of these are particularly useful for the purpose of this paper.

The first article of faith for comparativists states that education is a 'living thing' (Sadler, 1964). You cannot extract selectively one of its parts, an institution for example, transplant it into a different national context and expect it to grow and bear the fruit it bore in its former environment. It is like expecting to grow an orchard in the Arctic out of transplanted date palms, or to grow an orange tree from leaves and flowers gathered from a neighbour's garden. The disillusionment of those foreign advisors who attempted to transplant western institutions into Third World countries in the 1960s (Arnove, 1980) or of those reformers who are presently involved in importing Anglo-Saxon managerialism into their own education systems (Cowen, 1996) bears witness to the truth of this assertion.

The second article of faith states that things outside education, i.e. in the broader social context, matter more than the things inside the education system itself (Sadler, op.cit.), in the sense that the social context is mainly responsible for every major development within education. The values that govern education are social values; educational concerns and priorities are basically social concerns and priorities. As individuals, we have been moulded by the society in which we have grown up; we are creatures of our time and circumstances, or as a prominent comparativist once put it, prisoners in a web of social meanings and assumptions we do not ourselves recognise (King, 1976).

Concern for equality of opportunity in education has direct expression in the social equality movement. The plea for further democratic reforms in education reflects contemporary social concerns to deepen and strengthen democratic citizenship, especially in those countries that have suffered in the near past under autocratic regimes. Respect for otherness in schools is an expression of the broader social consent for cultural pluralism and for political-cum-religious tolerance. Concerns to strengthen the school/labour market relationship bear witness to the significance attributed by society to the economic role of schools.

The last of the three articles states that social contexts, and hence education, differ. They have developed differently through history, under the influences of different forces and factors; present circumstances



and future prospects encompass different priorities and agendas of political action in education. Compare, for example, Irish and French society and then look at the place of religion in the school curricula; or compare English and Greek society and contrast the managerial autonomy of English schools to the complete administrative dependence of the Greek on the Ministry of Education; or compare Swedish and German society and observe the comprehensive organisation of the former and the multi-partied system of the latter. Compare American individualism and pragmatism to Japanese corporatism and paternalism in the business world and you will discover their relationship to social and educational values: to the protestant ethic and the pioneering spirit of early immigrants in the USA, and to the family values of respect and of concern for its members in Japan. Look at all these examples and you will readily appreciate the role of history and tradition. Look also at the entrepreneurial culture that has been introduced into English and Dutch universities and compare it with Greek university adherence to the notion of higher education as a public service and you will readily see how differently these societies perceive the issues of globalisation, international competition, modernisation, etc., that currently pervade public discourse.

Comparative education and study visit programmes

To the education policy-maker the important question is not, however, the validity of the above three articles of faith; he/she probably readily agrees with them. The crucial point is how he/she could make use of them in constructing and successfully implementing study visits in practice. To provide a convincing though still tentative answer we should start with identifying the main aims of these programmes. Arion constitutes a good representative case: according to the Commission, 'the main aims of the study visits are: a) to enable those exercising important educational responsibilities [...] to renew and modify their work in the light of direct experience of educational structures and reforms in other member states and b) to increase the amount of high quality, selected and up-to-date information about education developments throughout the Community which is available to policy-makers' (European Commission, 2003).

It is clear that the Arion and other similar programmes, such as the Leonardo study visits, have a distinct reformist and meliorist outlook. Participating policy-makers, administrators and educators are expected to gain first-hand, trustworthy information that they can, and will, use at home - in reform projects and in education policies that will capitalise on other European countries' experience. It is an assumption and an approach to policy-making on the part of EU authorities which is reminiscent of the noble intentions of the founding fathers of state systems of education (never actually renounced as instruments of policy-making). For many years, politicians have continued to come back home from ministerial meetings - now perhaps more than ever before, as the meetings are more formal, frequent and multilateral - impressed by the education successes of particular countries and ready to embark on yet another reform project (Phillips, 1989; 2002). Should we remind ourselves of the enthusiasm social-democrat politicians exhibited in the 1960s over the Swedish comprehensive reform? Or perhaps of the excitement across Europe about technical-vocational education that would relieve the pressure on general education and propel economic development? Should we also remind ourselves of the impact British education policies in the 1980s had on neo-liberal politicians across Europe, or the present obsession with lifelong learning, adult education or quality assurance? How many times have technocrats, administrators and educators of all kinds at local, national and international levels brought to decision-making committees their frequently misconceived wisdom on foreign systems of education? Frequently this has taken the form of a scrappy mixture of circumstantial evidence, inadequate information, naive interpretation, unsustained generalisations, wishful thinking and prejudice. Every comparativist who has participated in policy-making committees can readily cite examples of unfeasible proposals based on various misconceptions of the realities of foreign institutions. In the face of all this, what does comparative education have to offer?

The first piece of advice comparative education can offer study visit officials has already been hinted at. By stressing the historical and contextual character of educational institutions and, the consequent limitations of educational borrowing, comparative education warns national policy mak-



ers against a naive and superficial interpretation of EU suggestions for national policy modifications 'in the light of direct experience of educational structures and reforms in other member states' (European Commission, op.cit.), that would lead to inconsiderate adoption of foreign education practices. It also exposes to pervasive criticism all those convenient assumptions and unsubstantiated certainties that frequently prevail in decision-making committees. Thus, from the beginning, policy-makers and prospective study visitors are made aware of the pitfalls of their task.

The second important contribution of comparative education consists in pinpointing the inherent difficulties facing all agents involved in a study visit programme. One is epistemological: our observations can never be truly objective, however hard we try. This is not so much because 'things that really matter most in life and in education, and the social situations in which they have their real meaning are far too complex to lend themselves to any kind of supposedly objective observation' (King, op.cit: 14); it is mainly because we see what we have learned to see. We bring to our observation our entire history, personality, present emotions and acquired intellectual equipment (ibid.: 15).

This is as true for the layman as for the expert. He too, especially when looking at a particular aspect of a foreign system of education, looks at it differently, according to whether he is an academic researcher, a consultant to foreign education authorities, a study visitor or a partner in a reform project; academic background and research priorities and skills also have an effect.

Our limited objectivity places a number of restraints and obligations on us. First, we should understand that this is so and be always alert to limitations in our observations. Secondly, we should systematically cross-check our data by comparing them with other reliable data or by consulting others who are more familiar with the specific educational system and its social context. We should try to develop our comparative skills by studying relevant methods and techniques. Finally, we should always remain open-minded, down-to-earth, moderate and circumspect and be prepared to put to the test all information and points of view and reconsider our views in the face of new ev-

idence. Perhaps today more than ever, we should be prepared to put to the comparative test, and to our critical judgement, all information about foreign educational developments and all advice from international organisations about our own educational systems.

The second difficulty is conceptual in character. It reminds us that every valid and reliable study should be based on a clear understanding of the concepts, and the ideological assumptions behind them, that underpin our perception of the world and of education, especially when it comes to studying foreign education systems. Concept formation takes place in a specific society and is therefore culturally defined. Even within a single society, people do not attribute the same meaning to the same concept. This is more evident with modern concepts like globalisation or knowledge society, to which different meanings are attributed by academic analysts. Incidentally, this calls for greater circumspection on our part when we are told that we have to abide by the rules set by the inescapable forces of globalisation, international competition or technological innovation. But to return to the comparative dimension: when attempting to study a foreign system of education, we must be fully aware that people abroad may attribute different meanings to some of our concepts. The term 'public school', for example, has a totally different meaning for the British than for the continental European. *Gastarbeiter* and their training are peculiarly German terms. Greek teachers have only recently become acquainted with the concept of 'curriculum' in its Anglo-Saxon version, although many of them still perceive the 'curriculum' - or the analytical programme as most of them still call it - as a list of the school textbook chapters to be taught. The same is true for the concept of 'professional autonomy', which in their eyes means they have fewer obligations to abide by central directives, rather than that they must participate fully in decision-making at the school level.

Indeed, every student of comparative education has, in taking his/her first steps in the field, undergone a cultural shock caused by approaching a foreign system of education with the conceptual baggage of his/her own cultural background. A Greek student, for example, carrying the basic concepts of a centralised system of education - centralism,



structural uniformity, legalism, etc. - would be hard pressed to understand how a system characterised by structural, administrative and curricular diversity can function. By the same token, the British student would find it equally difficult to perceive the character of instruction in Greek schools - where the content, organisation and teaching method are prescribed by the State - if he/she approaches it with the concept of professional autonomy in its English version. The moral is that unless we approach foreign education systems from the proper conceptual context it is almost certain that, by the end of our study, we will have gained the wrong impression, reached the wrong conclusions and hence, failed to benefit from other peoples' experience.

The third contribution of comparative education to the success of a study visit programme relates to the fact that education functions and operates within a social context which is constantly forged by tradition and by the vision of an aspired future. A study cannot be complete if it fails to understand and appreciate this context. You can not simply go out and visit schools - normally the cream of the education system that host authorities offer - attend lectures, talk with teachers and administrators and then be sure that you have a comprehensive view of the system, or a part, and of the policy you are interested in. More significantly, you cannot sense and appreciate the intangible forces that lie behind and explain its function and the dynamics of change in this specific education system. Yet without this appreciation, it is difficult to understand the context or to draw useful lessons from a study visit. Examples from Greece help illustrate this.

Suppose that the topic of interest during a study visit to Greece is the European dimension in schools. It is very likely that in your visit to Greek schools you will come across enthusiastic teachers working with highly motivated pupils in a number of well-designed projects in which a variety of creative approaches are utilised. Yet the success story you will have heard and seen would not serve you as a lesson for reform at home, unless you were able to take into account the specific social context of the situation you had observed. Greek society, as a whole, has always been inclined to strengthen its links with Europe and the European Union, both on cultural and on

political grounds. Greeks have always prided themselves on having offered Europe the fundamentals of civilisation and being themselves the children of the European Enlightenment. At the same time, accession to European Union has always been seen as a shield against external threat and internal political instability. Without this kind of political support, the European dimension in education would perhaps not have stood the same chance of success. And without such understanding on their part, study visitors examining the European dimension in Greek schools will not obtain the useful lessons and experiences they seek.

By the same token it would be difficult to appreciate fully the success of policies related to educating immigrants and refugees in Greece and to draw useful lessons from them without considering that almost half of the Greek population is descended from Greek refugees from Asia Minor in 1922 and that Greeks have shared the pains of emigration for many generations.

A final example is of value. Despite some progress, ICT has not yet been successfully introduced to Greek schools. A study visit will perhaps reveal some of the obstacles and difficulties. These would perhaps be related to state administrative inertia, to the inadequate initial and continuing training of teachers or to the lack of proper infrastructure. Yet a fuller and a clearer picture, from which to draw useful lessons, is not possible without also appreciating the relevant intellectual and ideological factors that underpin Greek education.

For historical reasons, Greek education has been traditionally devoted to the cultivation of the mind and of the moral sense. Theoretical rather than practical knowledge was considered genuinely worthwhile, and teachers have learned over the years to reflect this in their work. For technology to establish a foothold in the curriculum it must not only overcome institutional obstacles but also change traditional school culture.

Some in optimistic and enterprising reformist circles would object to this emphasis on the role of tradition and of social and cultural forces. Their argument is that education today is basically about skill provision, adaptability and flexibility in a rapidly changing, chaotic, globalised world; it is about individualism and cultural preference, about



vivere rather than *philosophare*. States and individuals, so the argument goes, which tend to ignore the realities of globalisation, of the technological explosion in information technology and biology, of the multicultural character of post-modern societies and of cultural relativity, of the decline of the nation state and of the downfall of the enlightenment, and which in general fail to appreciate the omnipotence of international forces and the inevitability of the changes they imply, are likely to end up at the fringe of world society and the rearguard of history. Hence there is persistent and pressing advice to educators to go with the flow - and taunts against those who fail to comply.

The answer to such remarks is twofold. The first point is that these accounts of international forces and of their corollaries are simply inaccurate. The nation state remains strong and the sole frame of reference for the political legitimisation of supranational formations (Mattheou, 2001), despite some losses in its economic and political responsibilities. Globalisation, disputed and detested on various grounds, is neither a new nor an all-embracing phenomenon (Hirst and Thomson, 1996; Ashton and Green, 1996). Contemporary technological explosion, though impressive and perhaps of unprecedented strength, is but yet another step in the long series of similar explosions, which have yet to make their creative impact felt all over the world.

The second point is that most of the aforementioned arguments are a-historical, positivistic and to some extent deterministic. They do not take into consideration people's capacity to reject and confront supposedly omnipotent forces and their willingness to give direction to history. The long intellectual history of the European continent speaks for itself as to the dialectical character of history and of human progress. And Europe's great contribution to the world's civilisation has demonstrated beyond doubt the significance of active political involvement in the writing of history.

Preparing study visits in a comparative perspective

Translating theory into practice is undoubtedly a difficult task; a course in aeronautics and the plane's manual are certainly not enough to make a safe flight. By the same

token, comparative education provides the guidelines to make study visits more effective; it cannot exorcise the evils of misunderstanding altogether. It is in this spirit that the following remarks should be understood and considered.

A study visit is basically an act of communication and, for the purpose of improving its effectiveness, it should be regarded as such. The visitor gets in touch with a number of people working in or related to an organisation and/or an institution. They are supposedly ready to satisfy his/her interest by explaining the situation and by providing answers to his/her queries. In reality they send out an encoded message in accordance with their assumptions as to what the interests of the visitor are and what they themselves consider fundamental in and representative of their organisation or institution. In this respect the hosts make use of certain concepts that are familiar to them - and expected to be familiar to their visitors - while on some occasions they take contextual aspects of their message for granted.

Visitors interpret - or in a more technical sense, decode - the message in accordance with their own assumptions, conceptual background and personal preferences and interests. As visitors come from different national and/or cultural backgrounds, the variety of their assumptions, interests and conceptual contexts lead them to different interpretations of the message; they understand the situation differently.

Finally, a double administrative layer is responsible for bringing the visitor and the visited together: the host authorities decide what programmes to offer and organise study visits, while the visitors' authorities select applicants in accordance with certain criteria, provide background information prior to the visit and receive reports after that the event. Both layers are of great significance in the communication process. In deciding the 'sender', the 'receiver' and the topic, they decide, to a great extent, the message and its interpretation.

Having analysed the participants in the communication process we can now pass on to the description of the phases of a study visit and pinpoint the areas in which comparative education may help. For analytical convenience, we divide the process into five



distinct phases. First is the selection of the theme, the content and the structure of the study visit by the host authorities. Second is the selection of prospective visitors in accordance with certain specified criteria. Third is the preparation and support of prospective visitors by the visitors' authorities. Fourth is the visit itself, which includes both visitors and a number of hosts, selected by the host authorities, again in accordance with certain criteria. Reporting back, both to the visitors' authorities and to a broader audience of educationalists, is the final phase.

Phase one is largely dependent on two determining factors. Study visits should respond to the specific priorities of the Socrates/Leonardo Programmes and to the realities of education in contemporary Europe; they should also take into consideration what the host country can offer. Although most education problems and policies are quite similar for EU countries - the inescapable outcome of, among others, the forces of globalisation, European integration and the knowledge society/economy - there are certain education issues peculiar to the various countries in terms of either prevailing circumstances or the innovative character of adapted policies. The transformation of educational institutions in the ex-communist European countries - under circumstances certainly peculiar to them - and the policies of managerialism in British schools - an innovation consistent with British organisational traditions - come under this category. Thus the distinction between 'similar' and 'specific' problems/policies raises questions of the relevance of the topic of a study visit to foreign educators (especially when it comes to specific circumstances) and it certainly places different demands on visitors as to their knowledge of the prevailing circumstances in the host country. A Greek educator, for example, would wonder whether studying the local management in an English school is relevant to him, since he works in a highly centralised education system. Should he find this study visit theme interesting, he would have to learn more about the decentralised traditions of English schooling, about the professionalism of English teachers, about the liberal character of English politics, about public faith in scientific management, etc., than if he had to study, say, special needs education.

Comparative education can provide the means to distinguish between the similar and the

peculiar - from the beginning this has been one of the main aims - and to reveal the character and the relevant significance of similarities and of peculiarities in policy-making. This is a contribution of obvious importance to selecting and structuring study visits. Provided that authorities do not offer to visitors what is simply startling and at hand only to meet their conventional obligations, and that they possess the necessary comparative expertise, they can select a theme and organise the study visit around it to underline the important contextual elements of the policy and to stress the peculiar vis-à-vis the similar. By the same token - because even within a society there are always different perspectives and points of view - host authorities should allow for adverse/minority views to be presented as well as for defective institutions also to be visited and observed. This will not only provide a more comprehensive and accurate understanding of the situation but will also raise the level of creative confusion on the part of visitors which, as a core element of genuine interest and of participatory involvement, will lead to a deeper and a more accurate understanding of the situation; this is, after all, the ultimate goal of the visit. The first phase is not merely a matter of organisational and procedural technicalities. It lays the foundations for a successful study visit. At this level, therefore, national/regional authorities should not hesitate to ask for help from comparative education experts and to cooperate with their counterparts abroad.

The second phase is the responsibility of the visitors' authorities. They normally select prospective visitors on the basis of language skills (they should speak the language of the study visit at an advanced level), of their interest in or pertinence to the theme and of their rank in the education hierarchy. While these criteria cannot be faulted, they are not sufficient. Since a study visit is a communication exercise in which observation, decoding and understanding really depend on the visitors' conceptual context, their value system, their assumptions about good education, their real motivation, etc., authorities should get a more comprehensive and accurate view of the prospective visitors' profile. Experience has shown that, for some educators, participation in a study visit is merely a matter of curiosity or an opportunity to travel abroad and to meet other people (a useful thing in itself but not a top pri-



ority in the relevant programmes). For others, internalised predispositions prevent them from fair observation. There are always those who, for example, see in the German system of technical-vocational education the perfect model, or those adherents of encyclopaedism who despise the essentialist GCE-A level curriculum and who are inclined to look only for evidence supporting their prejudice. Profiling prospective visitors on the basis of certain descriptive qualitative characteristics is a useful exercise and a prerequisite for the next phase.

The third phase, lies at the heart of the process; during this phase prospective visitors are coached for a successful visit. Relying on detailed and accurate information about the theme, the content and the structure of the study visit - information passed on from host to home authorities during the first phase - and having established individual profiles (phase 2) authorities are now in a position to organise ad hoc seminars which could include short courses on the comparative study of education. Irrespective of the specific study visit theme, all prospective visitors should be warned against the pitfalls of biased observation, of decontextualising issues, of confusing the general with the peculiar, of ignoring the significance of circumstances and traditions, and so on. Case studies from the extensive bibliography of comparative education on misunderstandings and misjudgements which led to real blunders in policy making could be of great help. Visitors could also be given background information about the host country education system and its socio-economic, cultural and political context, not in a piecemeal manner but in a systematic way, which would allow the prospective visitor to appreciate existing relationships between the observed institution, on the one hand, and the intangible forces and the realities of life that influence its function, on the other. It is only in this form that information about the host country or about one of its institutions - normally provided in other ways by home and host authorities today - makes real sense and becomes useful. These short courses could culminate in developing a flexible general flow-chart or observation grid that could allow the participant to focus only on the important institutional aspects, to discriminate the general from the peculiar, to appreciate the innovative and the useful and so on.

There could also be short courses that would update prospective visitors (for the novice in the field this might be a preliminary introductory course) on the latest developments, both in scientific and in policy-making terms, of the field in which the study visit theme belongs. This is of crucial importance mainly in newly developed interdisciplinary areas like ICT education, special needs education, or multicultural education, especially in countries where relevant experience and expertise is limited. A final course could also aim at coaching prospective visitors in communication techniques and overcoming the difficulties related to applying these techniques, especially at the international/cultural level where communication codes normally differ. As examples of the cultural character of these codes, 'private education' excludes state financial involvement for the Greek, something which is certainly not the case for Western Europeans, while 'secular education' bears different connotations in France, Ireland or Greece.

The fourth phase refers to the actual visit, where the quality and the efficiency of the previous planning and preparation activities are tested. This refers to the structural and organisational aspects of the visit, to the personnel involved, to the selection of the sites and/or the events of the visit, to time management, etc., all of which set the scene for a successful study visit, as well as for its educational quality and its usefulness in policy-making terms. It is worth emphasising the central role of the personnel involved. As key figures in the communication process, they should be fully aware of the significance of coding, their own and that of their visitors, and thus prepared to be continuously in tune with their visitors' interests and modes of thinking. It is essential that the whole visit process should be systematically evaluated both by hosts (authorities and participants) and by visitors on the basis of agreed objectives and criteria and that, to this end, every valid and reliable instrument of evaluation be used.

Finally, the conclusions of the evaluation should be recorded on a structured, well-documented report. The different perspectives will reveal misunderstandings and weaknesses as well as the strong points of study visits that could then be used for the continuous improvement of the whole programme.



At least two major reservations and/or objections to the above process might be expected. The first relates to the amount of effort demanded from all agents and persons involved (authorities, educators, host institutions, organisers). The second concerns the lack of expertise on their part, especially in profiling, comparative education and communication techniques, and project evaluation. While the process described is demanding, it is important to set policy priorities right. Maximising the results of a highly appreciated - and quite expensive - action is worth a greater effort. After all - to answer the second objection - the whole project in its proposed new form counterbalances the additional workload with the involvement of expert human resources and with the introduction of a more rational and efficient organisation structure, which excludes duplication of effort and maximises state functional assets. Thus, administrators will continue their organisational and coordinating work and visitors will keep reporting, but in a more structured and systematic way. Profiling, seminars in comparative education and in communication techniques will obviously be the realm of experts (e.g. academics) from the relevant fields. Together they are expected to bring coherence and efficiency to the system and bring it closer to the expectations of the founding fathers of study visit programmes.

Coda

Learning from others in education through study visits and direct observation has a long history. It has always been comforting to expect that you may avoid mistakes and make safe decisions in educational policy-making by simply following in the footsteps of others and by taking advantage of their experience. This expectation is even stronger today as we endeavour to integrate Europe and deepen our understanding of each other. Yet the exercise has not always been successful. Education institutions are far too complicated in themselves and closely interwoven with society to allow for an easy and clear understanding on the part of its students.

Comparative education may be of help in this respect both by raising awareness of the importance and the pitfalls of the task and by providing the proper approaches and techniques for its successful accomplishment. This implies reconsideration of the procedures followed thus far in the several EU study visit programmes as well as of the active involvement of other agents and experts that would be prepared to work in close cooperation with administrators and educators. No matter how difficult the proposed new arrangement may seem at first sight, it is worth trying. International understanding is the bedrock of continuous peace and prosperity, the ultimate goals of European integration.

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